THE VANISHING OF THE WHITE ANGEL

I

Since the day he came to the monastery, Brother Vasilije had carried a secret. Each morning, after the first bell and the first prayer, he would pause beneath the fresco of the White Angel. Day by day, a magnetic force drew his gaze upward, and he felt an invisible thread binding his eyes to the Angel's face. Even during the liturgy, Vasilije would glance toward the southern wall of the main church, stealing looks as a love-struck youth might, for whom only one being exists in the room. In the evenings, before the last prayer, he would bathe that same face in the gentle flame of his lamp, and in the fractured darkness it would transform, engraving itself so deeply that, when he closed his eyes, he saw the Angel in the blackness.

Vasilije knew this was no ordinary reverence such as monks might hold for relics. He could not, in truth, explain even to himself what he saw, and moved through his days like a hesitant novice who ascribes his earlier beliefs to superstition, yet trembles again when faced with his own illusions. No matter how he tried to reason with himself, each morning he returned to the Angel, certain of one thing: that face, painted on the church's southern wall centuries ago, had belonged to someone he had known.

There could be no doubt. The flushed cheeks and curling hair were Tadija's. All might have been dismissed as coincidence were it not for the faintly crooked smile on the red lips, exactly as Tadija used to smile. Each night, Vasilije tried to summon Tadija's face in all its features—thick brows, large eyes, the curve of the jaw—and each time he ended in the same place. The memory fused with the fresco, and what had once existed in the guarded treasury of his mind the painting had swallowed and reshaped, so that Tadija became the Angel, and the Angel, Tadija.

He feared to admit that what had happened, what he had seen and would yet see, no longer existed in any true sense; that life consisted of images bound by a false thread which might snap at any moment, erasing the certainty of the past and allowing faces and people to change at some arbitrary will. That Tadija had been the bodily manifestation of a celestial being was something he could not accept. In the end, someone would have noticed. Or perhaps, when life left his slender shell, it had somehow strayed into the fresco, altering the Angel's face.

Their teacher, Brother Antonije, liked to acquaint his pupils early with death and decay. The old man had a habit of wandering into the woods to choose some object or some small inhabitant, then bringing it back to the school to show the boys, always with the same lesson. Life, as first perceived by man, is cruel, painful, and transient. These were meant to be glad tidings. "What is true lies beyond." Vasilije remembered one time when the elder brought back a dead tortoise, gathered the boys, laid it on the table, and began to prod and tap its belly with his stick. Under the pressure, the lifeless creature shifted and scraped its shell against the wooden tabletop. The

boys knelt along the table's edge, standing in silence as if witnessing the greatest of sacraments, while Antonije, exalted above them, launched into the same familiar sermon, full of unbroken certainty, as if reciting a multiplication table.

Usually Vasilije could endure these lessons—Antonije's displays with pressed flowers, caged hares, various insects—but this time, he recalled, he had felt an unbearable nausea as he listened to the scraping and turning of the shell, as though this living thing had suddenly been transformed into a stone that could utter nothing. And so, while the old man spoke and gazed somewhere over the heads of the gathered boys, Vasilije's eyes brimmed, and for the first time he surrendered to his cowardice and ran from the group, to the wall that separated the monastery from the forest, where he could hide behind a bush and cry without end. His small head had tangled everything together: reality seemed like a husk that could be peeled away and pierced. He looked for a crack through which he could reach that true world the elder spoke of, imagining that a blinding light would burst from it. He saw it too in the furrows on the old man's forehead. But beneath it all there was only more of ordinary life, and that had to end.

Tadija understood nothing of this. Life poured from his fiery cheeks in such abundance that he could not demand permanence behind things, and dead animals he took as given. That he, of all people, should now sit so still and eternal upon an empty tomb, in the form of an angel, turned into an unchanging image, was unimaginable. He had a habit of climbing onto a stone, bare to the waist, and delivering a lecture in defiance of the elder, shouting, "There in the woods such and such a creature hides, and it is my intention to find it!" Though thin, he had broad, sharp shoulders and long arms he loved to wave about, so that to the other boys he seemed larger than he was; his leanness lent him the elegance of an animal that has shed all excess and needless weight.

Vasilije was in love. At the time, he did not know it was merely the invalid's habit of clinging to those who are full of life. He now remembered how, the first time Tadija chose him for an adventure, the night had been heavy with secrets. Tadija had woken him with a whisper: "Come, I'll show you something." He seemed to have the gift of stepping into the lives of others without apology, and of being allowed to do so. Vasilije followed the shadow through the dark. The sky was clear and violet, and the moon looked like a hole through which a celestial creature gazed into this world. On the line dividing field and forest, Vasilije had seen—so it seemed then—a holy vision: a composition of lights blinking in and out, appearing in another point on the black canvas, capturing the whole spectrum of being and ceasing, like that which the Greek philosopher had once described.

Deep in the forest, where boys were forbidden to go, lay a great stone, and in the stone a cave. It had stood silent for years before the monastery was built, likely before even God had walked the earth. Here was the passage he had sought. Surely there had been ancient altars scattered over the land, from which burst the same silverness that adorned the moon and stars, hidden light behind

things, and Vasilije imagined how the whiteness might swallow him, how he would let it take first his fingers, then his limbs, and finally his face, until he joined the radiance, the essence that inhabited the world. And so, bewildered, he followed this wild creature through damp green walls in sacred silence, until the rock swallowed them both.

Then, upon the image of the moon and the cave's immanence, there was laid—by that false thread—the picture of Tadija's back, when they carried him unconscious from the forest and laid him on the table in the courtyard. Although night had not yet fallen, the sun had vanished so that the sky, without stars, took on a strange deep-blue hue, aware that memory would remain. Now, as he looked at the fresco, that sky grew lighter and swelled, so that it seemed the disaster had taken place in another world, beyond all human rule. The elder monks did not permit the boys to gather, so the old man, his jaw trembling with anger and fear, drove them all early to bed. But for boys so early schooled in death, sleep was impossible, and small heads peered from the narrow stone windows, climbing onto stools or each other's shoulders to catch a glimpse of Tadija's body.

Had he managed to see Tadija's wrapped, still form—had he found a better angle at the window and seen the monks carrying him—the image of the Angel might have been different, and the careful, unbroken thread that led to the face on the wall might never have existed. Yet this did not happen. Desperate to see what was happening to his friend, Vasilije ran again into the courtyard, and before they seized him by the arms, between the shadows of the monks' robes, he saw a vision joined to the violet sky as though summoning the world's end: from a shoulder blade jutting from Tadija's narrow back, like wax melting from the candles he had watched in the dark, a liquid seeped and spilled from the shadows, taking on a strange color. Thus revealed, the red-silver mixture showed something hidden in Tadija, something that had to leave him, the secret essence of his being. What lay within Tadija's shell—was it a secret trying to escape before it could be subjected to examination and the testimony of decay? Or had an opening been made so that the boy might grow wings? But then, how had he ended up on the wall of this monastery, where Vasilije appeared years later? He had to know.

II

Not long after Vasilije's arrival, the monastery received a visit from a party of Latins, two of whom took an interest in its frescoes. The younger, Giacomo, would often sit in a sunlit corner facing the southern wall, studying the Angel's face. Passing by, Vasilije would watch the Latin drag his charcoal across the paper, striving to recreate the expression the monk knew so well. The artist seemed in torment, which gave Vasilije a certain satisfaction. Though ignorant of art, he was annoyed by the hubris of this foreigner who believed he could reproduce something so singular. He wanted to tell him the fresco was inhabited by the spirit of an old friend, and that it was beyond human making, so any imitation of that face would be cheap and false.

There was another advantage: if he approached the artist under any pretext, Vasilije could gaze at the Angel's face without shame before the other monks. In truth, like a man dying of thirst in a desert, he could never drink enough from his source. He could look upon the mystery until his gaze dissolved the horizon, until the image became the only thing before his eyes, until he was immersed in a sea whose reflection was the Angel, the picture surrounding him, entering him.

He hoped the young artist would notice this and begin a conversation in which Vasilije might pour out all his feelings, doubts, and confusion. But for Giacomo there was nothing but the charcoal and his paper. One morning, fearful that the visit would soon end, Vasilije addressed him in careful Latin: "Why does our Angel interest you so much?" Giacomo started, his round fleshy cheeks twitching. He looked more a craftsman than an artist, with thick, charcoal-stained fingers and the vulgar manner in which he handled his tools. He set aside his notebook and smacked his lips. "Your master knew what he was doing. See how elegantly the angel sits. The turn of his neck is entirely natural. And the color of his tunic…"

Vasilije was repelled. The first thing he mentioned was anatomy! He had expected the Latin to hand him the key to a chamber he could not enter, to reveal the secrets of artists who, under a curtain of darkness, smuggled souls into their works. Instead, he spoke of a turn of the neck. Hoping to keep the exchange alive, Vasilije mentioned what he had learned from the elder who had spent decades in the monastery: that the fresco had been painted by a Greek who later vanished in Russia, more than three centuries ago; that it belonged to the Byzantine school; that similar figures could still be found in the ruined mosaics of Constantinople; but that the whiteness of the robe, with its golden clasp at the shoulder, had been a daring innovation in the portrayal of heavenly beings. "Who remembers the water that has passed?" the elder had told him. But the Angel had remained, serene and beautiful, and whatever happened outside, however subject to decay the beauty of sky, flower, or human body, he was there on the wall, a seal of eternity, a sign of another world where beings are exalted and imperishable.

Seeing the Latin intrigued enough to stop drawing, Vasilije pressed on. "Yet you seem uninterested in our other icons or frescoes. You've fixed on the Angel." Giacomo smiled like a man ready to spread his heresy. "What is man compared to an angel? This is no saint. He does not repent. What need has God of beings beside these? Look at him—he is complete, everything in him makes sense." And once more the Angel appeared in perfect form, with one wing folded at rest, the other poised for flight, with light spilling from his cheeks and white robe, as though within him he held the life as it ought to be—just as Tadija had once known how to show it. Blood rushed to Vasilije's ears, and he felt ashamed that he could not describe his feelings with such precision.

Their conversations continued over the following mornings, each clinging to his own passion, each hoping to meet halfway and understand the other. Vasilije was jealous, for however unreachable the fresco seemed, he too longed to create. He thought it the only way to honor the

mystery he still witnessed each morning: to strive toward creation, knowing he could never reach it, like a man walking toward the horizon. It would be enough for it to be a form of prayer, a promise that could never be fulfilled, for the chiseling and tearing apart of the vision into fragments, though it brought pain, brought him closer to the Angel.

Both imagined that the unknown Greek had simply expelled the complete image from himself, that there had been no agony in its creation. By contrast, the process seemed to Vasilije like a perpetual birthing, screaming in pain without end. Giacomo, he thought, was too proud, as if he were master of the Angel and not its servant, promising to Vasilije that he will reach the Greek's mastery. For him, everything was grounded in human reason and form, from which beauty arose. To Vasilije's dismay, Giacomo declared that the drawing of a head and face began with a simple circle, then divided by four lines. Vasilije could not believe this was the secret behind the mask that had been Tadija's face, and he clung desperately to the hope of some primitive force guiding the artist's hand, shaping the lines according to its own incomprehensible will.

On the night before Giacomo was to leave, he invited Vasilije to bid farewell to the Angel together. In the dark, everything was heightened: the wet grass beneath their bare feet, the candle flames in the windows, and the church stone whose veins glowed as though freshly fallen from the heavens. Giacomo prepared to give Vasilije his final lesson. The curve of the church's vault seemed to gather the candle's small flame into every corner. Shadows fluttered across the Angel's unstained robe, reminding Vasilije of endless existence. This last night, he was ready to share with Giacomo the nausea that drove him from the impermanence of things, and the boundless life he saw in the Angel. Eternity, yes—but what kind of eternity? Not the one old Antonije had promised. It declared its perfection to the world; it did not hide but came forth to the surface.

They spoke again of perfect Ideas and the Will that manifests them. Giacomo told him of masters in his own land who had devoted themselves to beauty so that they might defeat time and outlive all else. "Man is no longer merely man. We hope to extract from him something worthy and lasting. That is why I speak to you of geometry… Besides, how beautiful the young man must have been who inspired the artist." Vasilije tried to hide his trembling. "A young man?" Giacomo replied without much care: "You know, in our country, to be a muse is a profitable trade." He could ask nothing more. A young man! How would this foreigner react if Vasilije told him that young man had died ten years ago—centuries after the Greek had painted the fresco? He would no doubt answer something vulgar and simple, like "of course, there are resemblances."

He awaited the morning, jealousy gnawing at him as he thought of that ancient inspiration. But it was Tadija—of that he was sure. Or else the boy was born again and again, living the same careless life somewhere else. And still, in his mind, the words echoed: *How noble that young man must have been…*

III

“Guard our Angel for us. I am sure I shall return to visit him again.” Giacomo clasped Vasilije’s fingers in his thick hands, and thus took his leave. He departed the monastery satisfied with his studies, certain that the knowledge he carried away could be kept and shared, as though the Angel, imperfect, now rested in the leather pouch at his side.

Vasilije imagined a curly-haired youth dressed in the same robe, seated upon a stone that was meant to be a tomb, his neck tilted into the position Giacomo had sought to perfect. But the face—what of it? Giacomo’s forms would swallow it as well, for if the Latin was right, that was all Tadija’s beauty amounted to, and what could be repeated once might be repeated again. Surely that must be the explanation. With that thought the world began to whirl into one vast repetition—leaves rising and falling on the wind—and eternity again seemed no more than a cipher behind things, not the thing itself. The life he had encountered as a child was, in the end, not unique, but recurring, destined to be again and again.

His daily witness beneath the southern wall now took on a new hue. The Angel seemed ready, at any moment, to take flight. How had he allowed Giacomo to leave? The longer he thought of that night, the more the Angel’s face was joined by the round, foolish face of the artisan, and his lustful glances at some youth he broke apart into lines, the twitch of his cheeks, the squint when Vasilije tried to explain what the Angel was and what lay hidden in that expression. He wished he had punished the Latin that night when they looked at the Angel for the last time—handed him over as a sacrifice. But now it was over. Tadija, the presence within the wall, would vanish. Giacomo would return with his pupils, and they would all admire the lifeless work, crumpling paper after paper until the form was perfected and could be reproduced without flaw.

Back in his cell, he closed his eyes. A flash, like the one he had seen in the cave ten years before, drew him onto the path leading from the monastery courtyard to a small wood that overlooked the church. Was it a doe, or some other creature bearing a star above its head? From this distance nothing could be seen; the moon was gone and the tree-tops had dissolved into the horizon. He walked a long time, as though too weak to climb the slope, his thighs heavy.

When he turned, the monastery was gone. Its ancient walls, tiled roof, and the golden cross rising from the dome’s summit had vanished. In their place lay scattered stones, like the forsaken altar of elder gods. From the forest came a chuckle. The same creature again—now clearer—stood on two hairy legs, with a great belly and a merry, drunken human face. It stretched itself, snakelike, wound around a tree, and pointed toward a lit patch of forest. At the start of the path, which surely led to the cave, lay a body, wrapped from the waist down in a white robe.

Vasilije bent toward the ground to examine the obstacle. At once his whole body shuddered. He could neither move nor breathe. From two holes in the vast shoulders poured a blinding silver

blood that seemed to conquer the entire world. It entered his eyes and mouth until he could breathe no more.

That night he resolved to destroy the Angel—to hide him behind a wall of plaster where no one else could see. "What have you done?" they would ask when they found out, and he would explain how he had tried to save the beloved fresco from ruin. They would call him mad. Then a new, ordinary fresco would be painted over the grayness, and he alone would remember the Angel, shining in his mind like a beam through glass. He imagined a scholar centuries later, studying their civilization, coming upon a crack in the wall where the Angel's eye lay, and feeling the gaze of the celestial being. Then the wall would swell, as if the hidden creature breathed; light would burst from the fissures, and the Angel would be revealed once more, forever, for by then knowledge would be gone and no one could reproduce him. The Angel would be one.

Behind a shed near the monastery's edge, where the masons took shelter from the sun, he began to mix plaster with sand and water. The sky hung low, as though pressing upon the world and summoning the Angel. Shadows shifted and lengthened under the small flames that covered the monastery, indifferent to Vasilije's great tragedy. Moths danced as if close to death. His heart drank in everything until it nearly split like a red fruit. A black horse's shadow emerged from the dark and startled him. The gray mixture swallowed the world's colors.

Then he came before him again.

Carrying a long candle with care, he climbed onto a stool and brought the flame so close to the face that he could see the mingled colors in the cheek that gave the illusion of life. The Angel regarded his destroyer calmly, as if saying, *I understand everything, everything, and I am ready for death.* The wood beneath Vasilije's feet creaked under his weight, echoing in the dark. He laid his thin hand on the Angel's robe, as a gesture of forgiveness. This destruction, this touch with the trowel, he thought of as his embrace.

He began at the head. Taking the lifeless mixture, he struck with the blade, spread the material across the face, again and again, until the eyes no longer peered through the thin layers of gray. Once more—this time with more plaster, so that it clung to the wall and spilled down the Angel's robe. The Angel was beheaded. Tadija's face was gone. It was not a beautiful death, he thought; everything about it was ugly and wrong. What would a man think, seeing this headless creature? Could he ever imagine its beauty again? Sweat clung to Vasilije's cheeks, the smell of it mingling with wax and incense, and he ceased to think.

He dragged the trowel over the wall, flinging plaster left and right, sometimes devoting himself to the Angel's hands, then, when he noticed the women's faces who had once witnessed the Angel, covering them too. It seemed to him he was fulfilling his role, as the moon and the sun do theirs. He gave himself to the work with his whole being, sealing every small gap, for each

seemed like a shaft of light entering a prisoner's dark cell and giving him hope. There was no hope. The Angel had been swallowed by a vast grayness and no longer existed. He hovered now only in memory, engraved in the monk's eyes. The gray of morning pushed through the small church windows as if to wrap him completely.

Soon the other monks would come and find him beneath the wall. They would call him madman and heretic, perhaps drive him from the monastery, and life would go on. The liturgies would echo as before, the monks, young and old, whispering prayers into the ancient stones. Artists would find other inspirations. Vasilije would remember his Angel. When they had forgotten, he would return to the same southern wall to see another fresco, beneath which the Angel might hide, perhaps to hear the faint rustle of his wings. Then his memory would begin to fade; the face would become only a contour, the precision of its colors only an approximation. At last even his eyes, in which the Angel had been kept, would betray him, leaving nothing but a sensation and the occasional trace of remembrance.

The White Angel is a distinguished 13th-century fresco in the Mileševa Monastery, depicting the Archangel Gabriel at the scene of the Myrrh-bearing Women at Christ's tomb. Painted over during later centuries, it was rediscovered in the 20th century following restoration work after a fire. Since its unveiling, it has been regarded as a masterwork of Serbian medieval painting and a seminal monument of the Byzantine artistic tradition in the Balkans.